

The Salkeld Screen, Carlisle Cathedral: Understanding the Iconography

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No records remain in Carlisle Cathedral relating to the Salkeld Screen. Therefore we must regard the screen as an historical document in itself, the deciphering of its visual imagery providing as much insight into the historic, artistic and spiritual movements of mid-sixteenth century England as from more conventional documentation. We do know from the evidence contained in the screen itself that it can be dated to between 1540 and 1547. Few such medieval screens now exist. This paper sets out to demonstrate how the thinking of the mid-sixteenth century dictated so much of the Salkeld Screen's design, iconography and symbolism, by discovering the sources from which the designs derive. Further, the intention is to show that the purpose underlying the screen is to celebrate the Tudor myth in the person of Henry VIII himself, with its allusions to both the politics and the theology of the time.

FOR almost 900 years the Cathedral has dominated the centre of Carlisle: first, in 1122 as the priory church of Augustinian canons, and then in 1133 as the cathedral church of St. Mary's Carlisle. From the earliest days the canons shared the building with the parish church of St. Mary's which occupied the westernmost bays of the nave. The Cathedral kept the St. Mary dedication until 1540, when the last prior, Lancelot Salkeld, surrendered it to the commissioners of Henry VIII. In the following year the king ordered the foundation of a new Chapter, at the same time changing the name to the Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. The last prior, Lancelot Salkeld was appointed as the first dean with jurisdiction over both the Cathedral and St. Mary's Parish Church, which continued to occupy a place in the nave until the late nineteenth century. The Salkeld Screen, the subject of this article, now standing in the north aisle of the Cathedral, serves as a reminder of these events of 1540, when such momentous changes came about.

The years leading up to 1540 had been particularly troubled in the north of England. Tudor avarice had seen the religious foundations as a source of considerable wealth, and the years between 1536 and 1540 had seen the closure of several abbeys and monasteries in Cumberland, with the social and economic upheavals that this had entailed. Added to these were growing concerns over the religious changes resulting from the king's break with Rome and the powers over the church he had assumed as Supreme Head of the Church of England. Public outrage from all classes had led to a rising known as the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536, and a similar rising in the northern counties in 1538 which ultimately resulted in Henry VIII exacting widespread retribution. No fewer than 73 Cumbrians who had taken part were ordered to be hung in chains, some on the city walls, others in their own villages, amongst them the sub-prior of the Cathedral and the Abbot of Holm Cultram. Thus, coming so soon after these terrible events, the erection of the Salkeld Screen must have served as an ever-present reminder of the consequences of Tudor power unleashed.¹

No records remain in the Cathedral relating to the screen: its purpose, its placing, its costs, its construction, or even who commissioned it. Therefore we must regard the screen as an historical document in itself, the deciphering of its visual imagery providing as much insight into the historic, artistic and spiritual movements of mid-sixteenth century England as from more conventional documentation, with clues derived from many and various sources. We do know from the evidence contained in the screen itself – Henry VIII’s royal coat of arms and the initials of Lancelot Salkeld D. K. (Decanis Karliolensis) – that it can be dated to between 1540 and 1547, from when the new foundation came into being until the death of the king. It has been identified as being Anglo-Flemish work of the mid-sixteenth century, being far more early Renaissance in character than medieval Gothic, although still having some aspects of the earlier period about it.² The design of the screen follows the commonly accepted fifteenth-century model,³ made up of a series of open panels with tracery at the top and a solid base of wainscoting, whose panels correspond to the traceried openings above, all surmounted by an elaborately carved cornice or brattishing. The vertical muntins between the open panels or ‘windows’ were also highly decorated and with a central opening or a set of double doors to allow passage. Few such medieval screens now exist: decorated with the Rood, saints and martyrs, most were destroyed by the iconoclasts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as being corrupt, vain and superstitious. However, being totally devoid of saints and martyrs, the Salkeld Screen survives.

Historians of the Cathedral have always accepted that the screen is “of the highest importance,” and with the symbols of royalty carved on its north side, and those of Christ’s Passion on the south side, its importance cannot be gainsaid. Yet many aspects of the screen remain enigmatic, particularly the series of portrait heads, six on each side, set in classical roundels, with few attributions to identify them, and sets of equally enigmatic letters which defy explanation. This paper sets out to demonstrate how the thinking of the mid-sixteenth century dictated so much of the Salkeld Screen’s design, iconography and symbolism. Further, the intention is to show that the purpose underlying the screen is to celebrate the Tudor myth in the person of Henry VIII himself, with its allusions to both the politics and the theology of the time.

In its present form the screen shows ample evidence of its having undergone considerable alterations, leading earlier writers to assume that it had been constructed from pieces of other works.⁴ This study sets out to refute this and aims to demonstrate that the various elements of the design all point to a cohesive scheme of decoration, and, moreover, one that was common at the time, thus emphasising the construction of the screen as a complete entity, made between 1543 and 1547. However, there are many indications that at some time the screen has been considerably reduced to fit into the space it now occupies. Each panel has had a few inches shaved off one side, as demonstrated in the way the moulding has been cut off, and the bases of the two stone piers between which it now stands, have been cut into to accommodate it.

The symbolic meanings of the decoration covering the screen, with the strange grotesques and portraits also challenge us to explain their presence. The screen may exude importance, but it hardly excites feelings of deep spirituality - on the contrary,

portrayals of an African with a large earring, a helmeted man, and a man in a strange turban with three buttons on the top, would seem to be decidedly non-Christian, while most of the females look to be dressed more for the Courts of Love than those of Heaven.

Anonymous heads such as these are a frequently recurring motif in Tudor Renaissance decoration, often referred to as ‘romaine’, to distinguish the work of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from the antique. Mostly, however, by the mid-sixteenth century the associated attributes found in medieval work are lacking, making it almost impossible now to identify the subjects. Present-day art historians seldom attempt the task, contenting themselves with mere description. The only way forward is to try to discover the sources from which the designs derive. Such sources are mostly to be found in the proliferation of printed sheets and pattern books taken from the continental woodcuts and engravings that flooded the sixteenth century, following the widespread advances in printing. These cover a wide variety of subjects and schemes, taken from the Old and New Testaments, classical gods and goddesses, the coins of the Roman emperors, and series such as the Seven Liberal Arts, the Nine Worthies, the Ten Sibyls, or the Seven Deadly Sins personified. So many of these books were produced, and so many are now lost, that it is rarely possible to identify sources, though it is sometimes possible to track the same source as being used in several different places.⁵

In the case of the Salkeld Screen, the way in which the heads have been designed and carved suggest that six of them (1, 3, 6 on the north side; 3, 4, 5 on the south) probably derive from a single source, in that they are dressed in identical garments, as well as showing similarities in the treatment of hair, beards and other features, and at least five of the heads suggest a more ‘antique’ source in the design of their clothes and headdresses. In comparison with many existing examples of ‘romaine’ work, the quality of the carving displayed in the Salkeld heads is of a high order and the treatment of the faces and figure work indicate that the twelve heads are by the same hand.

Previous articles on the screen have been limited to descriptions of the contents and to outlining the history of the period and events behind its construction. Little has been written regarding the iconography or the identities of the interesting group of heads dominating both its sides. Regarding the latter, such small identifying clues as exist are so concealed in the elaborate carving of the parchemin panels that their meaning only became clear to the author after a possible identification of the heads had been arrived at.

The iconography of the screen: the north side

On the north side of the screen (Fig. 1), everything is dynastic, emphasising the Tudor myth, bringing in everything and everyone possible to endorse Tudor legitimacy – of supreme importance to Henry VII and his descendants. When Henry Tudor assumed the crown on the death of Richard III, several other claimants were equally well qualified to reign. This circumstance Tudor propaganda set out to obliterate ruthlessly. Every



FIG. 1. The Salkeld Screen: north side

detail on the north side is directed to emphasising the legitimacy and antecedents of the Tudor monarchy. The brattishing on top is dominated by the Royal Coat of Arms of Henry VIII, supported on either side by grotesque carvings of the dragon of Wales and the greyhound badge of Elizabeth of York. In the triangular shapes on either side are smaller shields, both bearing the sun emblem of Edward IV and the House of York, surmounted by the ‘three feathers’ badge of the House of Lancaster,⁶ all pointing to the termination of the Wars of the Roses under the Tudors. Beneath are scrolls bearing the enigmatic letters GSPE, for which various explanations have been offered, none really satisfactory.⁷

In the frieze below, the central compartment displays the Lancastrian three-feathered symbol again; that on the left a large *fleur de lys*, a reminder that the English monarchy still held claims to France; and on the right, a composite Tudor rose – all three panels being ornamented with grotesque heads in Tudor style. All these symbols are associated with Tudor royalty, but they are all also to be seen as symbols both of the Trinity and of the Virgin combined in an ingenious sixteenth-century conceit recalling both the new designation of the cathedral as that of the Holy and Undivided Trinity and that of its earlier incarnation as the Church of St. Mary.

In the wainscoting below, the Tudor theme continues in the series of portrait medallions representing a selection of royal antecedents – a scheme widely adopted

in the sixteenth century. Hutchinson, in his *History of Cumberland*, records such a series of royal portraits in Kirkoswald Castle, which were subsequently taken to Naworth Castle, showing King Brut and all his successors ‘portraited to the waist... showing their visages, hats, feathers, garbs and habits... One hundred and twenty panels painted with Saxon kings and Sovereigns of England down to the union of the Houses of York and Lancaster.’⁸ The Salkeld Screen shows Brut with seven Tudor antecedents, although there may originally have been more, as in a Cathedral guide of 1930, Dean Venn Stuart mentions that it had been ‘reputed’ that the heads on the south door were Henry VII and Prince Arthur. But there is nothing in the screen as it stands to suggest either of them, one of them being indisputably female. Perhaps this is another indication that the screen is now incomplete.

We now examine each head in turn, although of course it must again be emphasised that identifications have been arrived at by an examination of the iconography alone and cannot be corroborated from any written sources in the Cathedral archives.

North Side. Head 1: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond (Fig. 2)



FIG. 2.

In the wainscot on the north side, the first head to the left is of a female wearing a French hood in the style of the 1490s, completely enclosing the hair at the back, while revealing centrally parted hair in front. The hood is attached to a finely decorated band set quite far back on the head – the ‘habiliment’, which was often made of precious metal and frequently bejewelled. The dress, as much as can be seen of it, seems to be highly decorated in the front, covered by a fur-lined mantle. Behind the roundel are carved two straps or garters, and below in the parchemin decoration which fills the remainder of the panel, ornate foliage ends in scrolls, denoting

scholarly interests. All these, the scrolls, garters and the dating of the costume to 1490-1500, indicate that this portrait is of the Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509), grandmother of Henry VIII and a descendant of John of Gaunt. Closely attached to the Tudor court, and the last lady of the Order of the Garter in her own right, she was politically aware and astute, and relentlessly pursued the interests of her only son, Henry Tudor, seeing him at last crowned king of England as Henry VII in 1485. Highly esteemed as pious and scholarly, her interest in learning led her to provide professorships at Oxford and Cambridge. In Cambridge she founded both Christ’s College and St. John’s College, and demonstrated her great interest in books by supporting Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde. She died in 1509, surviving her son Henry VII long enough to see her grandson crowned Henry VIII. No portraits from life survive, only a stained glass window in Cambridge and a couple of posthumous

portraits showing her in a nun's habit. However, her accounts show that she was buying velvets, satins, damask and sarsanet, as well as bonnets and hoods, up to the year of her death, including a bonnet 'of ermine, with two hundred powderings.'⁹ Extremely proud of her membership of the Order of the Garter, it is said that she adorned her house and chapel with Garter fittings, and probate accounts show that at her death she left two bunches of garters for vestments,' priced at 8s. 4d.¹⁰ On the screen this head is shown with a pair of garters placed behind the roundel, and is the only head out of the twelve to be distinguished in this way. As Richard Aldridge, the Bishop of Carlisle at this time, was the Registrar of the Order of the Garter, this surely indicates interest in the contents of the screen on his part.

North Side. Head 2: Brutus of Troy (Fig. 3)

Those acquainted with Roman triumphal arches and Trajan's column will readily recognise the model type used by the carver for this head. It is typical of the depictions of conquered peoples in Roman carving, be they Gauls, Britons or Picts – with jaw-length hair and large moustaches, and mostly unbearded. However, this is not the figure of a captive. Dressed in a classical toga, he has an air of supreme confidence. He is likely to be the legendary Brut or Brutus of Troy. In the parchemin panel below this ancient Briton, is a mirror-image pair of wyverns, the heraldic birds associated with the early British kings



FIG. 3.

and said to have been on the banner which Harold fought under at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.¹¹ The sixteenth-century version of English history was a strange conglomeration of Biblical, classical Greek, imperial Roman, mythical and legendary sources as found in the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth and earlier writers. A patriotic desire to trace national descent from these early heroes led Tudor historians to record as fact the twelfth-century story that London, then named Troynovant, had been founded by Brut of Troy, the great grandson of *pious Aeneas*. Forced to quit Greece, Brut and his followers were directed by a goddess to an island 'beyond the sunset', now providentially devoid of giants and dragons, where he might found a line of kings. Long lists of these British kings, stemming from Brut and including Arthur, appear in the early histories of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.¹² Henry VII, being rather short in heritage, was quick to claim descent through his Welsh father from these ancient kings and employed an Italian, Polydore Vergil, to investigate the connections. Though Vergil shocked his contemporaries by questioning it all,¹³ this did little to discourage the general belief in accepting kings such as Brut and Arthur as historical characters. In the matter of his divorce Henry VIII, in his turn, employed scholars to collect every available manuscript relevant to this ancient line of descent to prove to the Pope that England was a sovereign state over which Rome

had no jurisdiction, while at the same time asserting his own secular imperium and spiritual supremacy. So to mid-sixteenth century minds, Brut had his rightful place in the Tudor line on the Salkeld Screen.

North Side. Head 3: Septimius Severus (Fig. 4)



FIG. 4.

The African head on the north doorway, classically draped and having crisp curly hair and a large earring, is striking. It is instantly recognisable as an example of the ‘Moor’s Head,’ a conventional motif commonly used as a heraldic device in Italy, Germany and the Netherlands from about 1400 onwards. However, this figure, dressed in a classical toga, knotted at the shoulder, suggests a Roman provenance. This is underlined below in the parchemin panel, where the foliage ends in two circular, rose-like, emblems, suggesting the insignia of the *Dux Bellorum* – the Roman army battle commander. In the context of

the screen, this head must represent Septimius Severus, the only Roman emperor of African origin. Severus came to power in A.D.193, reigning with the support of the army rather than the Senate. In his task of strengthening the Roman Wall frontier, he restored order in North Britain, before his death in York in A.D. 211. Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle relate that “Severus fought many battles and in Britain built a Wall across the country from shore to shore, which ran from Albany to Dura.” We now know that the Wall was built on the orders of Hadrian but it was always known as ‘Severus’ Wall’ until the late eighteenth century, and was accepted as such in the 1540s.¹⁴ Thus Severus was an ‘imperial’ forerunner from the great days of Rome, necessary to the Tudor monarchy seeking to be a power in Europe, and the title of Rex Imperator which Henry VIII awarded himself, harked back to this imperial past.

North Side. Head 4: Catherine de Valois (Fig. 5)

Next to the African emperor on the north door is a female clad in a fifteenth-century ‘Burgundian’ gown, v-necked and fur-lined, with the fur collar turned back. With this is worn a claw-like cap or headdress, decorated with ball-like ornaments on the forehead and under



FIG. 5.

the ear. This has been an elusive headdress to identify, but a similar one, as worn by Jehane du Lys, the Maid of France and Lady of Armoise is to be found on a fresco in the medieval castle of Jaulny in the Moselle district of France, dated to about 1430.¹⁵ A further French connection with the female head on the Salkeld Screen is the mirror-image dolphins, the emblem of French royalty, carved in the parchemin panel below, suggesting that this is Henry VIII's great grandmother, Catherine de Valois, daughter of Charles V and Queen Isabeau of France and herself the widow of Henry V of England, whom she had married in 1421. Henry V died young, leaving her with the son who became Henry VI. Catherine then formed an association with Owen Tudor, a Welshman in the royal service, who claimed descent from Cadwaladr and Owain Glyndŵr, the last independent Prince of Wales. Catherine had five children with Owen Tudor, including Edmund Tudor, Earl of Richmond, who married the Lady Margaret Beaufort. Their only son, Henry Tudor, defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth, to become King Henry VII. Ex-Queen Catherine died in 1434 and was given an alabaster tomb in Westminster Abbey. However, the questionable legitimacy of his origins always troubled Henry VII and, perhaps because of this, the Queen's tomb was moved to make way for alterations in the Abbey ordered by him. It was never replaced, and the lead-wrapped body of the unfortunate Queen became a tourist attraction to visitors,¹⁶ amongst them Samuel Pepys, who records that he visited the Abbey on his 36th birthday and 'kissed a Queen on the lips.'¹⁷

North Side. Head 5: Elizabeth of York (Fig. 6)



FIG. 6.

Fifth on the left is the lady with the 'ear-phones' headdress, wearing a low, square cut dress with a fitted bodice flattening the body, with the breasts pushed high, in the fashion of c.1500-1520. The hair is partly covered with a crespin, a form of hair net, usually made of knotted cord or even precious metals. Lined with silk, the net was attached to a decorated head band and clasped to the ears, with loose ties going under the chin, fashionable between 1490 and 1520. Crespins were mostly made in Flanders and France and imported into England, and Henry VIII's wardrobe accounts show that they were ordered by the court in large numbers.¹⁸ In the

parchemin decoration below, a small double crown entwined in the foliage suggests 'the crown in the bush,'¹⁹ a favourite device of Henry VII recalling his victory over Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth, which points to the identification of this lady as his wife Elizabeth of York, eldest daughter of Edward IV, with a claim to the throne as good or better than her husband's. Their marriage united the warring Houses of York and Lancaster: she was mother of Henry VIII.

North Side. Head 6: Owen Tudor (Fig. 7)

The last head on the north side is of a heavily-bearded elderly male, wearing a flat bonnet, with a finely carved feather, worn over an undercap covering the ears and with the ties hanging loose. He wears a cape-like garment with a high fur collar. The parchemin panel below consists of sweeping cedar branches with a small pine cone carved at the top of a central twig or stick divider. As the pine cone is the symbol of regeneration, this is also a Tudor ancestor, either Edmund Tudor, Earl of Richmond, or, more likely, Owen Tudor, his father, as Edmund Tudor died in his twenties. Following the death of ex-Queen



FIG. 7.

Catherine, who may or may not have been his wife, Owen Tudor was persecuted for having had the presumption to marry the widowed Queen, though when Henry VI came of age he allowed him to return to Wales with a pension. However, Henry VI was deposed by Edward IV, and following the Battle of Mortimer's Cross, Owen Tudor was beheaded in the market place at Hereford in 1460 on Edward's orders.

The South Side (Fig. 8)

The south side of the Salkeld Screen has always been considered to represent the 'spiritual' part of the screen, with its religious symbols prominent in the brattishing, and in this it represents very well the situation in the Church of England in the early 1540s when it was erected. In doctrine and in many forms of worship, Henry's church was still Catholic, but now the King saw himself as the source of all authority, God given, and the changes he forced on the church he saw as being God's will. The only change was that the source of all its authority was now the King and not the Pope. In everything, Henry was obsessed with his status: it had been evident in his reaction to those who had the temerity to rise against his policies in the Pilgrimage of Grace and in his response to the Pope's position on the royal divorce. He believed that the Pope was frustrating God's anointed in his God-given status, and believed that the changes he, Henry, was imposing on the English Church were God's will. As the inscription on Holbein's great portrait in Whitehall of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour with his parents, Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, points out, under Henry VIII, 'religion has been restored, and with him on the throne the truths of God have begun to be held in due reverence.'²⁰

In the central shield in the brattishing is the sacred monogram, the IHS crowned. On the left is a shield displaying the Crown of Thorns and the Three Nails of the Crucifixion,²¹ and on the right is the badge of the Five Wounds of Christ. Although at this time the badge of the Five Wounds was to be found almost everywhere, yet



FIG. 8. The Salkeld Screen: south side

it had been the symbol uniting those on the Pilgrimage of Grace, only recently put down with such cruelty, so that one might well ask if its inclusion here was a warning to the townspeople and the Dean and Chapter? Or was it a subtle mark of respect to those who had suffered the extreme penalty? In the frieze in the left compartment, a pair of grotesques scroll round the initials LS, DK, standing for Lancelot Salkeld – Decanus Karliolensis, the last Prior and now the first Dean of the new foundation. In the central compartment is a shield with a narrow cross which may well be the badge of the cathedral, but may also be recognised as the symbol of Christ in Majesty – a symbol recognised throughout the Christian world.

In the right compartment of the frieze is a shield with the letters LS again beneath another garter symbol. It has been assumed that these initials also refer to Lancelot Salkeld, but other interpretations should be offered. In a series of ‘constructs made for the purpose of meditation and contemplation’ by Constantine of Pisa in 1257, we learn that “concerning the letter L standing alone, according to etymology it is so called from Lusiando, and from Illuminando – that is, making clear what is obscure.” The letter S used on its own usually stands for Sovereign or Sanctus.²² So one might suggest, in the sentiments and expressions of the mid sixteenth century, that LS was

intended to convey some meaning akin to that expressed by Edmund Spenser's verses in the 'Fower Hymns':

'Ah then, my hungry Soul,
Look up at last to that Sovereign Light
From whose pure beams all perfect beauty springs ...
For from th' Eternal Truth it does proceed
Through heavenly virtue which her beams do feed.'²³

As the true meaning of LS in Lombardic capitals on the Salkeld Screen will never now be revealed, one must choose a meaning or offer other explanations, though in the context of the Screen, the play on the word 'sovereign' would be appropriate.

South Side, from the west. Heads 3, 4, 5: Henry VIII, Katherine Parr, Jane Seymour.

On the south side of the screen, the three central figures in the wainscot below are the most significant. In their dress these are clear persons of the 1540s, contemporary with the screen. I identify them as the King, Henry VIII, his present Queen, and his deceased Queen and mother of his male heir.

South Side. Head 3: Henry VIII (Fig. 9)



FIG. 9.

The two figures on the door are those that Dean Venn Stuart reported were 'reputed' to be Henry VII and Prince Arthur, but it may be shown that the male head on the south door of the screen is that of Henry VIII himself. This is not the Henry VIII as we would recognise him today, but the younger Henry as he appeared on coins from the second coinage of his reign, issued between 1524 and 1526.²⁴ He also appears like this, having no beard and his hair cut in a bob, in the well-known miniature by Lucas Horenbout in The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. It was believed that pressure from Catherine of

Aragon meant that he remained clean-shaven for the first part of his reign, but in 1535 we learn that his beard 'was to be no more shaven, but knotted,' and his hair was later polled in the continental fashion.²⁵

South Side. Head 4: Katherine Parr (Fig. 10)

The female head on the south door is that described by Bulman as 'A Youth'. Closer inspection, however, shows that it portrays a woman wearing a close fitting cap beneath



FIG. 10.

a flat bonnet. Very masculine in style, it displays the latest in female fashion of the 1540s,²⁶ and one much favoured by Katherine Parr. She chose to be painted in this fashion in the portrait by William Scroots of 1545 and in the inventory of her wardrobe we find she owned at least five of these ‘Caps of Black Vellat’, worn flat on the head as on the screen. As the head occupies the position on the door next to Henry VIII, one may suggest that this must be Katherine Parr, whom he married in 1543. She was described at the time as being ‘not beautiful, but possessing an inner strength that commanded attention... no giddy girl, but rather a woman of grace and maturity,’²⁷ qualities readily discernible on the Salkeld Screen portrait.

South Side. Head 5: Jane Seymour (Fig. 11)



FIG. 11.

This is a female dressed in the style of the late 1530s/early 1540s, wearing a close-fitting ‘lettuce’ cap, similar to those worn by several of the court ladies drawn by Hans Holbein. The lady also wears a square-necked dress with a necklace wound round her neck and disappearing below the neckline, another fashionable device of the time. This portrait closely resembles the only image of Jane Seymour that now exists, painted by Holbein but copied several times in his studio. At her death in 1537, following the birth of Prince Edward, the last rites were administered by the Bishop of Carlisle, her almoner, Richard Aldridge. In 1545, in the new Cathedral

Statutes, Henry ordered that prayers were to be said for the souls of his parents “and my late dear wife Jane.”²⁸

South Side. Heads 1, 2, 6: A Sibyl, King David, Hermes Trismegistus

With the passing of more than four centuries, it is hardly possible to identify the final three figures with any certainty. These are a female with a scroll-fronted headdress, and two bearded males with strange helmets – all three suggesting an historic or

mythological past. King Arthur? Solomon? King David? Even the god Mars? None of these would be put of place here. Indeed, Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, in the early years of their marriage, were often referred to as Mars and Venus,²⁹ and to the neo-Platonic mind, astronomical and cosmological speculation pointed to all stellar influences as being good, poured down from the Divine Creator.³⁰ At this time the presence of King Arthur or Solomon would have been equally acceptable, indeed the absence of Arthur from the line-up of illustrious ancestors on the north side of the screen is surprising. However, considering that the screen was conceived in a time of bewildering ecumenical change, when, as the behaviour of the Supreme Ruler of the English Church became increasingly erratic, and any doctrinal mistake or misunderstanding could lead to disastrous, or even fatal, consequences, a trio of pre-Christian prophets might well have been the safest choice to complete the ‘spiritual’ side of the screen. Therefore it is suggested here that the three are a Sibyl, the biblical King David and the magus, Hermes Trismegistus, all of whom in ancient times had prophesied the coming of a Redeemer to the world. The idea would have been acceptable in the early 1540s to Catholic and Protestant reformers of all variations, as all religious thought in these years was inclined towards discovering the first principles, the ‘prisca theologia’, of the Faith.³¹

South Side. Head 1: the Sibyl (Fig. 12)



FIG. 12.

In contrast to the other females on the screen, this figure wears a much less formal garment, lightly draped over the shoulders and finishing low on the breast with a central knot. Her headdress is bonnet-shaped on a curved frame at the front, highly carved on the top, and ending in a ball-flower ornament behind the ear. This is a typical depiction of a sibyl as found in Renaissance wall paintings in sixteenth-century Scotland.³²

The Sibyl was the voice of antiquity, and a profound symbol to the medieval world. Through her, Antiquity speaks. It was said of her that “the words of the Sibyl were worth all the wisdom of the

philosophers,” for according to Christian interpretation, she alone by calling Him by name, had clearly heralded the Saviour of Mankind.”³³ In earlier times it seems there was only one Sibyl but with increasing popularity their numbers increased, and by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there were as many as ten or even twelve, leading Sir Thomas Browne to complain that the pictures of Sibyls “were very common, and for their prophesies of Christ were held in high esteem but their numbers and their names vary considerably. They appear in many schemes of decoration, not only in Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling, but also in Raphael’s Vatican paintings, and in the Room

of the Sibyls in the Vatican painted by Pinturicchio, in the 1490s in the mosaics in the Duomo of Siena, in the choir of the Cathedral of Ulm, and also, much nearer home, in several large sixteenth-century Scottish houses, where they may still be found today.³⁴

As the Carlisle Sibyl is on her own here, she probably represents the most divinely inspired Erythraean Sibyl, praised by Augustine in the *City of God*, and who is recalled in the Mass, in the ‘*Dies Irae*’, along with King David, prophesying the Day of Judgement, which the Cathedral clergy would have repeated regularly in their devotions:

‘Dies irae, Dies illa
Solvat seclum in favilla
Teste David cum Sibylla.’³⁵

Or she might be the Sibyl Libica, who also foretold the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, “although her attributes are mysterious.”

South Side. Head 2: King David (Fig. 13)

This is a striking head, exuding authority. The bearded subject has a decidedly hooked nose, and wears a fanciful helmet with a forward-pointing hooked raised visor which, one might think, would have been a serious hindrance in the presence of his enemies. Nevertheless, to those acquainted with the *Biblia Pauperum* the connection is clear enough. There, David is invariably shown, rather like a figure in a child’s comic, wearing a hat having a prominent beak-like projection in the front, a good example of the way in which small, but persistent pictorial details were used as aids in recognition throughout the Middle Ages – though often elaborated on, as in David’s helmet here.³⁶ In the

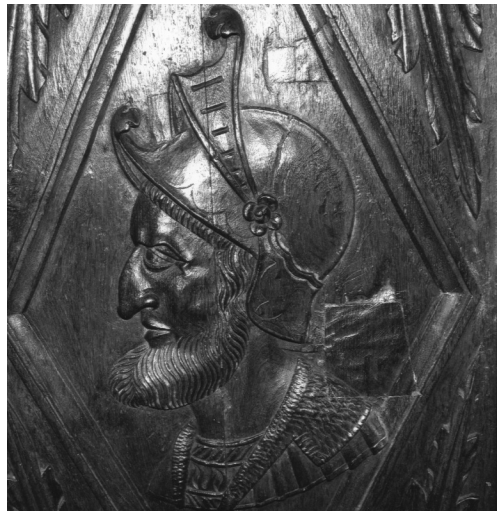


FIG. 13.

Old Testament, David comes in the line of prophets and patriarchs under the Law, and the Temple, one of a succession of Christ figures symbolising the Messiah, a link in the unbroken Chain of Being from the First to the Second Adam. Many of the Psalms attributed to David are Messianic and, as he himself declared, ‘The Lord hath said to me thou art my Son.’³⁷ Henry VIII identified himself closely with David, as is shown in his private psalter, illuminated for him by Jean Mallard in 1540, where in several illustrations he appears as David, ‘contemplating the Word of God by Day and Night,’ as the Psalmist directs.³⁸

South Side. Head 6: Hermes Trismegistus (Fig. 14)

As with the other five heads on the south side of the screen, with this there are no immediately identifiable attributes. The subject wears a tarboosh, a strange felted turban-helmet with a cloth which could be worn to protect the back of the neck, but here is bound round and secured with a clasp, and having three buttons carefully carved on the crown.³⁹ This is a Persian headdress, and the figure is also dressed in Persian garments, having a tightly fitted coat, or 'gaba', of sixteenth-century Persian style, fastened at the front, with narrow sleeves pleated at the top. Because of his great celebrity in the sixteenth century



FIG. 14.

one might suggest that this figure is Hermes Trismegistus. In 1488 the Cathedral of Siena laid down a great mosaic of Hermes Trismegistus, 'the thrice-great Hermes,' a prophet and priest who was believed to have lived in the time before Moses, and to have written about the Divine mysteries.⁴⁰ The main view current in the sixteenth century was that the older the knowledge and the closer to the Creation its source, the more accurately it mirrored the mind of God. So it was for Renaissance minds that Hermes came to be an important source as the first adumbrator of Christian truths. The Hermetic writings were a key source for neo-Platonic thinkers which, they believed, would lead through the study of Greek texts, to a purer faith and to an eventual understanding of, and union with, the Divine. As witness to such truths, Hermes was believed to predate Plato and Pythagoras, taking his exposition of The One and his equally holy Son and the one divine nature in the Trinity, The All, from pre-Judaic sources. This too had been implicitly believed by the leading Fathers of the Church, notably Lactantius and Augustine. It would not have occurred to anyone to question these undoubted authorities. True, Augustine had reservations, but all were agreed that in speaking of 'the Father God and his most holy Son,' Hermes, with his vast knowledge, was the 'supreme philosopher.'⁴¹ This view was adopted by all who dealt with the subject down to the end of the sixteenth century and beyond. Even after Isaac Causabon, in 1617, was able to show that the Hermetic writings belonged to the first century after Christ rather than to the time before Moses, people were loath to abandon them, as, well into the seventeenth century, John Milton was still contemplating Hermes and his philosophy in *Il Penseroso*'s

'...high lonely tower
Where I might oft outwatch the Bear
With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere
The spirit of Plato to unfold
What worlds or what vast regions hold
The immortal Mind...'

If Hermes Trismegistus is given such prominence in the Duomo of Siena, why not in the Cathedral of Carlisle? However, research reveals that the Carlisle Hermes would have been more at home in the Room of the Sibyls in the Vatican where, in 1492, Pope Alexander VI employed Pinturicchio to decorate the Appartamento Borgia.⁴² In his fresco, 'Hermes Trismegistus with the Zodiac', there is a figure carrying a scroll, wearing a tight fitting, collared costume as worn by the figure on the Salkeld Screen, in a fresco that may well have been viewed by Bishop Aldridge on missions to the Vatican on Henry's behalf in the 1530s.

These then are the main elements of the Salkeld Screen's iconography. There only remain the 'candlestick' ornaments on the north side muntins signifying 'I am the Light of the World.' A pair (here there are three pairs) was said to demonstrate the dual nature of Christ, who was both human and divine, and the ubiquitous three-part 'ball flower' ornaments, with the triangular three leaves motifs, all symbolising the Trinity. On the south side, bands of bay-leaf ornament and guilloche spirals are taken from Roman, Greek and even earlier sources, and the columns of carved chain ornament proclaim the hermetic 'Great Chain of Being' - a commonplace in sixteenth-century thought, deriving possibly from the Book of Genesis and Plato. As a sermon of 1547 expressed it, 'Almighty God has created and appointed all things in a most perfect and excellent order... He hath assigned Kings, Princes, with other governors under them... In good order, and to every degree of people has he appointed their duty.'⁴³ The Chains are here as a reminder that everyone and everything must keep to their allotted place or, perhaps, in this case also carrying a warning: oppose Henry VIII and be hung in chains, as were some of the participants in the Pilgrimage of Grace.

Thus, the Salkeld Screen is a celebration of the Tudors' lineage, including Henry VIII's great grandparents Owen Tudor and Catherine de Valois, his grandmother the Lady Margaret Beaufort and his mother Elizabeth of York. However, the series lacks Henry VII, Edmund Tudor, his father, and the ancestor no Tudor would wish to be without, King Arthur. This returns the mind to Dean Venn Stuart's mention of Henry VII and Prince Arthur as reputed to have been on the screen door. When the screen was its full width, did it perhaps have another door bearing all these worthies - a door that had been removed at some time in the screen's history and not quite forgotten? No documentary evidence exists: this is only one of the many questions which arise concerning the screen as it is today.

This suggestion should cause no surprise, however. The story of the removal and destruction of carved woodwork from the Cathedral is a tragically long and involved one, well researched and recorded in articles in these Transactions and elsewhere.⁴⁴ Some pieces were made into a sideboard and other fittings at Featherstone Castle in Northumberland, some turned up at Carleton Hall near Penrith and even appeared in 'Ye Great Baronial Hall' in the former Wellington Hotel, Carlisle.⁴⁵ The Cathedral, being a monastic establishment with the parish church of St. Mary's, Carlisle, situated in the western bays of the nave, a screen of some sort must have been in place to shut off the laity from the canons, and thus one might speculate that the screen's original purpose was to be found here. Screens bearing the royal coat of arms to replace the Rood were increasingly used following the Act of 1549.⁴⁶ However, once again no

evidence is to be found. Even more frustratingly, the screen does not appear in the north aisle in 1727, as neither the screen nor the flight of steps leading up to it figure in the Browne Willis 1727 plan of the Cathedral,⁴⁷ though it is in its present place in the north aisle by the 1790s when Billings published his work on the Cathedral. Dr. Todd does mention ‘a very stately door and porch on the north side’ of the Cathedral as being in place in 1700,⁴⁸ but whether this refers to the screen, or part of it, once again we do not know. What we do know is that after the Reformation the Cathedral was always short of money and never in a position to commission new ‘stately’ woodwork. So could the nave screen have been reworked as the ‘very stately door’ before being installed in its present position? Once again, there is no record.

How did ordinary Carlisle people feel, one wonders, to find their cathedral treasures, including the statue of the Virgin with her lamp, and the sword that slew St. Thomas Becket, replaced by a screen carrying portraits of Tudor ancestors and strange pre-Christian philosophers, all carrying a weight of interpretation which was entirely foreign to almost everything they recognised.⁴⁹ Who, one wonders, decided that this should be done, and moreover chose the figures to be included in the decorative scheme? Of Dean Lancelot Salkeld himself, we know little. He must have been an Augustinian canon, and connected with the Cathedral hierarchy for some time, as he is mentioned unfavourably in the *Comperta* – a record of investigations by Henry’s commissioners into the conduct of the monasteries.⁵⁰ That he was a Catholic of the old school would seem to be indicated by his resignation on the accession of Edward VI and his reinstatement on the Catholic Queen Mary’s coming to power, followed once again by his resignation on her death. It appears he would have gone along with the new system of church government, rather than raise objections. Of his scholarly attainments we know little. However, the Bishop of Carlisle, Richard Aldridge, was a noted scholar. Aldridge was close to the royal family and had been sent by Henry on several missions abroad, as well as having been provost of Eton, and a lecturer at Cambridge.⁵¹ He was Recorder of the Order of the Garter, the friend of Erasmus, and as almoner to Queen Jane Seymour had been with her at her death and presided at her funeral. So the head of the diocese was in close touch with the leading scholars of the day and would have been well aware of the ‘new learning’ and the movement in the Catholic Church in England to sweep away the accretions of the Church fathers in a return to the ‘*prisca theologia*’, or first principles of the Faith.

Also employed in the Cathedral was Hugh Sewell, a ‘government Preacher’ who had arrived in Carlisle in or before 1538, at the time when the closing of the monasteries was at its peak. He may well have been a government spy, sent by Thomas Cromwell, the King’s minister, following a report by Sir Thomas Leigh that the diocese was “tractable, lacking only good instruction.” Described in another article in these *Transactions* as ‘the wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ Sewell had reported the Cathedral clergy for continuing to use a service book relating to St. Thomas Becket which Henry VIII had forbidden. He was given a pension for life of 28s. 6d. which, after a visit to London following his accusations, was improved to £13 6s. 9d. and a position as ‘expositor lector called the Dyvyne lector’ and with his Oxford M.A., which he later improved to a Doctorate in Divinity, he was reckoned a scholar.⁵² So as both Bishop Aldridge and the ‘dyvyne lector’ were in Carlisle at the time of the commissioning of the Salkeld Screen, it was

likely that they had input into its contents. Also, interestingly, the presence of the King's Carpenter in Carlisle in 1543 and Bishop Aldridge's appointment to oversee the King's works in the town,⁵³ leads one to ask if he, too, had a part in the making of the screen, as further research might show. However, this again is supposition. The enigmatic Salkeld Screen still has much to reveal: its original location, its size, its construction, its provenance and how it was paid for – all surely leaving much more to be discovered.

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Glossary

- Brattishing: the decorative carving on the top edge or cornice of the screen.
 Frieze: the flat section below the cornice, usually carved or painted.
 Muntins: the upright posts supporting the elements of the screen, sometimes, as here, richly decorated.
 Parchemin: a form of elaborate double-image enrichment, derived from medieval illuminated manuscript illustration (on parchment), where one half of the design is a mirror-image of the other.

Notes and references

1. H. Summerson, *Medieval Carlisle*. CWAAS Extra Series 25 (1993) 2, 484-493.
2. C. Tracy, *Continental Church Furniture in England* (London, 2001), 12-13.
3. R. Foster, *Discovering English Churches* (London, 1981), 189-91.
4. J. Cory, 'Carlisle Cathedral'. *CW1*, (1874), 26-35.
5. M. Bath, *Renaissance Decorative Painters in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2003), 185-214.
6. J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. (London, 1989) suggests the three feathers badge derives from the Roman 'tofu', a bunch of feathers standard on a pole. Cadwaladr carried one. Perhaps this is why the Lady Margaret Beaufort used it as a symbol of power as she claimed descent from him.
7. G. S. P. E. - one of those enigmatic sequences of letters common in late Gothic art. G. Bulman, 'The Gondibour and Salkeld Screens in Carlisle Cathedral', *CW2* 56, (1956), 104-27 suggests 'God Save Prince Edward.' C.M.L. Bouch, 'The Salkeld Screen in Carlisle Cathedral', *CW2*, 57 (1957) 39-43 disagrees. Another suggestion may be taken from Ramon Lull's *The Dignatories of God* (1297), an attempt by Ramon Lull to get Christians, Moslems and Jews to agree on some things, such as God is good, wise, powerful, etc. He devised a system of capital letters: G (Gloria), S (Sapientia), P (Potestas), E (Etenitas), etc., which was still in use up to the sixteenth century. Roughly translated, the Lull capitals become 'Thine is the Kingdom, Power and Glory for ever.' See F. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London, 1979), 12. In 1540 the language of public worship in the Cathedral was still Latin (H. Summerson, *op. cit.* 631).
8. W. Hutchinson, *The History of Cumberland* (Carlisle, 1797), I 206.
9. M. Hayward, *Dress at the Court of Henry VIII* (Leeds, 2009), 85-6.
10. *Ibid*, 86.
11. D. Ware and M. Stafford, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Ornament* (London, 1974), 236.
12. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of England* (c.1154) (London, Everyman edition, 20); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, Everyman edition, 8-9).
13. H. Morris, *Elizabethan Literature* (Oxford, 1958), 127-128. Some scholars, like Ascham and Nicholas Baxter, were prepared to reject this ancient genealogy on other grounds, raging against "that infamous legend of King Arthur...the horrible acts of those whoremongers Lancelot and Tristiam...and the vile and stinking story of the Sangrail."

14. W. Shannon, *Muris Ille Famosus*, C&W Tract Series 22, (2007), 3ff.
15. P. Sermoise, *Joan of Arc and her Secret Missions* (London, 1970), 184ff.
16. Dictionary of National Biography: Catherine de Valois.
17. S. Pepys, *Diary* (23 February 1667-8).
18. M. Hayward, *op. cit.*, 171.
19. It was said that Lord Stanley found Richard's crown in a thorn bush on the battlefield, and gave it to Henry Tudor.
20. The Whitehall portrait, by Holbein, was destroyed in the fire of 1698 but a seventeenth-century copy remains in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court.
21. This piece of brattishment on the west end of the screen was missing when Billings visited the Cathedral in 1839, so what is there now must be a replacement. (D. Weston, *Carlisle Cathedral History* (London, 2000), 51.)
22. M. D. Anderson, *History and Imagery in British Churches* (London, 1971), 181.
23. L. Winstanley (ed.), *Edmund Spenser: The Fowre Hymnes* (Cambridge, 1916), 35-39.
24. Seaby, *Standard Catalogue of British Coins* (London, 1970), 127 (a half groat).
25. M. Hayward, *op. cit.*, 7.
26. *Ibid.*, 150, 185. By the 1540s a number of elements were drawn from male clothing.
27. L. Porter, *Katherine the Queen* (London 2010), 62.
28. E. Prescott, *The Statutes of Carlisle Cathedral* (Thurnham, 1836), 76.
29. D. Starkey and S. Doran, *Henry VIII, Man and Monarch* (London, 2001), 60.
30. E. Panofski, *Studies in Iconology* (London, 1962), 163f.
31. J. Hannam, *God's Philosophers* (London, 2009), 232-235.
32. M. Bath, *op. cit.*, 195-7.
33. E. Male, *The Gothic Image* (London, 1961), 337ff.
34. M. Bath, *op. cit.*, 195-7.
35. E. Male, *op. cit.*, 337; M. D. Anderson, *op. cit.*, 132-144. "The day of wrath will come when all will perish according to David and the Sibyl."
36. *Biblia Pauperum*, British Library Blockbook C9D.2, *passim*, and M. D. Anderson, *op. cit.*, 215, 173.
37. Psalms of David, psalm 2 (Authorised Version).
38. D. Starkey and S. Doran, *op. cit.*, 184.
39. J. J. Boisard, *De Divinatione et Magisis Prestigilio* (1605) shows an illustration of Hermes.
40. F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 2000), 1-20. When the Greek Hermes mss. Reached Florence, the dying Cosimo de' Medici ordered Ficino to stop all his other translations in order that he might read the works of Hermes before he died.
41. J. Hannam, *op. cit.*, 232-235.
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46. R. Foster, *op. cit.*, 189-90.
47. B. Willis, *A Survey of the Cathedrals of York, Durham, Carlisle, Chester, Man, Lichfield, Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester, and Bristol*, 1727.
48. D. Weston, *op. cit.*, 29.
49. H. Summerson, *op. cit.*, 43, 306, 359, 415, 603, 700.
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52. M. A. Clark, 'Hugh Sewell, Canon of Carlisle', CW2 91 (1991), 91-101.
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